



Photos by ERIC MOHL • Special to the Star Tribune

The author displays all the appropriate gear — from leather chaps to beautiful horse — as she prepares to mount up again after lunch on a riding vacation in Lagos de Moreno, Mexico.

HORSING AROUND

These guest ranches offer outstanding horseback riding and sophisticated style.

kind. Experienced enough to know a good horse from a bad one and itinerant and passionate enough to demand that every single precious minute on horseback makes me better in the saddle, not just saddle-sore.

As I've traveled across the United States and Mexico over the past three years, part of an ongoing road trip dubbed the Trans-Americas Journey, I've searched for and discovered a number of guest ranches that put a pleasing premium on good horses, good wranglers and great horsemanship for riders of all kinds. These picks from the herd also offer style, family fun, tradition and history. Saddle up!

Read about the ranches on **G6** ▶

By KAREN CATCHPOLE • Special to the Star Tribune

On the first day of a weeklong riding vacation at Home Ranch in Colorado, the head wrangler moved among the guests, asking each one a simple question: What kind of rider are you? Their responses helped the ranch staff pair the human with his or her perfect horse for the week.

As the wrangler neared my seat, I began pondering the question and found it wasn't so sim-

ple after all. Although I owned my first pony at 6 and steadily upgraded through a string of horses over the ensuing decade, I hadn't done a lot of riding since, mostly because I'm unwilling to patronize riding establishments that amount to little more than nose-to-tail plod-alongs led by a pimply-faced relative of the owner who knows approximately as much about riding as he does about skin care.

So, what kind of rider am I? The very worst



Part of the herd at Triple Creek Ranch in Montana.



Cowboy boots on loan at Smith Fork Ranch in Colorado.



Venue for a barn dance at Home Ranch in Colorado.

FAMILY-FRIENDLY FUN

The ranch: Bar Lazy J Ranch in Parshall, Colo.; www.barlazyj.com.

The riding: A stable full of sure-footed trail horses makes easy work of the high-altitude sage-covered hills in this part of central Colorado and carry riders to sweeping vistas of the Ute Mountains and the Continental Divide.

The rest: Unlike some guest ranches, the Bar Lazy J not only welcomes kids, it caters to them with Range Rider and Lil' Buckaroos programs for ages 7 to 12 and 3 to 6, respectively. These programs, which run through Aug. 15, keep kids supervised and entertained from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. with activities including trail rides, frisbee football, caring for the ranch's animals and hayrides. The place also has a heated pool and hot tub, tetherball, shuffleboard, pingpong, air hockey, foosball, pinball machines and mountain bikes. The free DIY laundry room is another a plus.

Dining is at communal tables with plenty of options that kids will go for, including fresh-baked afternoon cookies. The comfortable log cabins are outfitted with sturdy furniture, lamps crafted of horseshoes and cowboys and horses everywhere (even on the bars of soap). If Gene Autry had designed cabins in the 1920s for Motel 6, you'd end up with something like this.

What's new: This season the ranch will offer an all-day (seven-hour) ride on the Darling Creek Trail in the nearby Arapahoe National Forest, which brings guests through aspen and pine forests to above the timberline for unobstructed 360-degree views. The Bar Lazy J also just completed a three-level children's playhouse fort that includes a climbing wall, a long slide and swings. A new children's ride will guide kids into the nearby town of Parshall, where they'll hitch up in front of the General Store and pick out two items (candy, ice cream, etc.) to purchase on the ranch's tab.

The rates: Weekly rates are \$1,725 for ages 13 and up, \$1,195 ages 7 to 12, \$995 ages 3 to 6 and children under 3 stay free. These rates are the same as they were in 2009 and include private cabin accommodation next to the Colorado River (which is merely a charming babbling brook here), all food and nonalcoholic beverages, all horseback riding, children's programs and use of all on-property games and facilities. Guests can bring their own alcoholic beverages, which can be chilled in coolers found on each cabin's porch. Open May to October.



Parshall
COLORADO



Bar Lazy J Ranch owner Jerry Helmick leads riders through grasslands in central Colorado. The ranch offers a variety of rides, including some for children. Photos by ERIC MOHL • Special to the Star Tribune

HORSING AROUND

PROUD TRADITION

The ranch: Hacienda Sepúlveda in Lagos de Moreno, Jalisco, Mexico; www.haciendasepulveda.com.mx/web_eng.

The riding: You may think you know how to ride, but here in the birthplace of charro (Mexican cowboy) culture and horsemanship, you most certainly do not. Everything from the saddle (which has an extra big horn), to the reining (which is feather-light), to the terrain (an almost stereotypical mix of scrub mesquite and towering cactus) will be new to riders from the United States. Luckily, Hacienda Sepúlveda relies on Jorge Serrano Zermeno and Lena Kissling to guide you during your daily rides to and from traditional haciendas. Along the way, Jorge and Lena (who both speak perfect English) will teach you the subtleties of charro riding techniques. You're guaranteed to walk away with new horsemanship skills.

The rest: Not only do riders here get to enjoy lunch at the best of the area's haciendas during the daily rides, they get to sleep in haciendas as well. The charmingly cowboy-bohemian Hacienda El Ahito (ahito is a Spanish word that means "satisfying") is run by Jorge and Lena and offers guests a chance to live on a comfortable working hacienda for a couple of nights. Subsequent nights are spent at 360-year-old Hacienda Sepúlveda, a luxury hotel offering 21 antique and modern-amenity-filled rooms and suites.

An amenity that is both surprising and handy for sore muscles is the hotel's spa. Walk into a brick and stone building, constructed in 1890 as the hacienda's grist mill, and you enter a thoroughly modern spa with a Jacuzzi, jetted foot reflexology pools, steam rooms, saunas and a few intimate treatment rooms. Services run the gamut from facials (50 minutes, \$35) to a three-hour traditional Temazcal (an indigenous version of the American Indian sweat lodge) for \$45. If you book your stay through Mexico Boutique Hotels, you get a free massage (www.mexicoboutiquehotels.com/sepulveda).

What's new: In January, Hacienda Sepúlveda unveiled seven new rooms, some with indoor or outdoor Jacuzzis, in what were originally the stables and storage areas.

The rates: \$1,050 per person (double occupancy) for a seven-day/six-night package or \$280 per person (double occupancy) for a two-day/three-night



MEXICO
Lagos de Moreno



Head wrangler Ciara Pares, left, prepares to hit the trails at historic Smith Fork Ranch, which features the cowboy-chic dining room shown above.

ELEGANT HERITAGE

The ranch: Smith Fork Ranch in Crawford, Colo.; www.smithforkranch.com.

The riding: A herd of more than 40 horses and miles of mellow creekside or rugged mountainside trails on the ranch and in the neighboring 1.7 million acres of the Gunnison National Forest and West Elk Wilderness Area ensure that there's a horse and a trail for any level of rider.

The rest: Homesteaded in the 1800s, when Colorado was still a territory, Smith Fork Ranch was more formally created in 1928. Now owned by Marley Hodgson, the retired founder and designer of the Ghurka leather goods company, and his wife, Linda, Smith Fork Ranch is one of the country's most lovingly restored guest ranches.

For two years, the Hodgsons fastidiously deconstructed each of the original log cabins, communal buildings and a two-story lodge — numbering each log, modernizing, and putting the structures back together again, log by log. Then the real work began.

Linda chose every luxe interior detail (local handmade bath products, plush bedding) and scoured the property to find original pieces of furniture and art. Few relics remained; this left her with the task of finding and designing the lion's share of the furnishings. Many were made by local artisans. The former local fire chief, for example, designed and forged the extra-long metal hinges that support the massive wooden door to the Elk Lodge communal building, capping each with a spinning antique spur.

Chef Brian Stephan turns out gourmet grub (pistachio-encrusted local lamb) with creativity and flair (popcorn ice cream, anyone?) and the ranch also has a wonderful bar. No wonder neighbor Joe Cocker sometimes pops by for dinner.

What's new: Head wrangler Ciara Pares and her team have cleared and opened five brand-new trails, inaugurated a weekly Wrangler Rodeo and will complete a Horsemanship Obstacle Course this spring.

The rates: Weekly rates range from \$6,500 (double occupancy) to \$22,500 (for up to 12 adults in the ranch house) and include lodging, all meals, nonalcoholic beverages and snacks and all on-ranch activities, including fly-fishing and casting clinics, archery, guided hiking and all riding and instruction. Open June to October.



COLORADO
Crawford



Riders with Hacienda Sepúlveda pass through the Central Mexican desert. Right: The ranch's guide and instructor, Jorge Serrano Zermeno, kicks back.



package. All rates include accommodation at Hacienda Sepúlveda, all meals, all transfers and daily guided riding. Open year-round.

SADDLE SPLURGE

The ranch: Triple Creek Ranch in Darby, Mont.; www.triplecreekranch.com.

The riding: Horseback groups are kept small — usually four riders or fewer, plus a wrangler — and on-ranch rides last three hours or less. The trails and logging roads that crisscross the 600-acre ranch in the Bitterroot Mountains are mellow and relaxing.

The rest: Rates are high, but Triple



MONTANA
Darby

Creek Ranch delivers. No one under 16 is allowed and the grown-up vibe is reflected in luxurious amenities such as private deck Jacuzzis, steam showers, fireplaces, a laundry service that returns your clean clothes wrapped up like Christmas presents and what I like to call an un-mini bar: a wet bar stocked with full-size bottles of complimentary spirits and wine.

The restaurant is equally sophisticated, earning Wine Spectator Awards of Excellence every year since 2005. Although all meals, snacks, most alcoholic and all non-alcoholic beverages are included in Triple Creek Ranch's inclusive rates, it's worth adding on the chef's Table (\$95 per person). The seven-course meal with wine pairings is served in a glass-enclosed private dining room off the kitchen where you can watch the action.

What's new: This season, 16 of Triple Creek's plushly appointed log cabins will debut renovations that include new carpet, fireplaces, slate flooring, doors and window treatments, bedding and artwork.

The rates: From \$650 to \$2,495 per couple per night, including meals; snacks and most drinks; on-ranch riding; downhill skiing; cross-country skiing; snowshoeing; fly-casting lessons; tennis, and use of the putting green. Closed March, April and November.

COWBOY CLASS

The ranch: Home Ranch in Clark, Colo.; www.homeranch.com.

The riding: The 4,000-acre Home Ranch breeds and trains many of its own horses. That

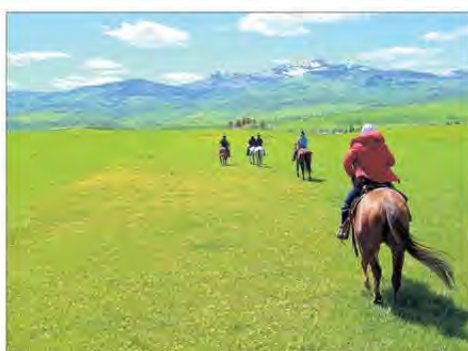
care allows as the horses double lope across the ranch's rolling meadows and confidently carry you up and over its hills and mountains — sometimes along steep and narrow trails that test your handling and balance skills. Need to work on those skills? The ranch will happily set up private lessons with a wrangler. This working cattle ranch also has plenty of cows that can be used for arena or open-range cattle work (which is harder than it looks, trust me).

The rest: Bone up on your do-it-yourself for the weekly barn dance with ranch staff, which features a live band and a square-dance caller. The ranch also takes guests on a hayride on Monday nights to a rustic building, where a gourmet cowboy cocktail dinner is served (their skilled chef celebrates his 20th year at Home Ranch this year). Free morning yoga classes are a great way to limber up for the day's trail adventures.

What's new: Home Ranch, whose guests have access to two miles of the trout-rich Elk River, recently became an Orvis-endorsed fly-fishing destination.

The rates: Weekly rates range from \$5,330 (double occupancy) in lodge rooms to \$19,265 (for up to six adults) in large cabins. Rates include all meals, snacks and nonalcoholic beverages, all riding and horsemanship work, guided hiking and guided fly-fishing. Open June to September and mid-December to mid-March.

Travel writer Karen Catchpole and her husband, photographer Eric Mohl, embarked on a road trip through North, Central and South America in 2006. After clocking more than 100,000 miles, they're now in Mexico. Follow along at www.trans-americas.com.



Rides are the main draw, but Home Ranch in Clark, Colo., also offers fly-fishing.



Clark
COLORADO